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Slave Route Museum Inaugurated in Matanzas, Cuba

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Slave Route Museum Inaugurated in Matanzas, Cuba

UNESCO Executive Committee President Olabiyi Babalola Joseph spoke about how the Atlantic slave trade forms an essential part of the shared history of Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and Americas

Matanzas -- The wails induced by whips and chains is a part of history that still needs to be told. From the 16th to the 19th century, the exportation of slaves dominated relations between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa.

The slaves were not the only merchandise, but the most valuable. The slave trade was practiced by the Portuguese, Genovese, French, Dutch, Danes and English who brought no less than 20 million Africans to the Americas.

On Tuesday, the city of Matanzas inaugurated a national museum on the Slave Route in the San Severino castle.



The museum has four exhibition spaces, including a command house, archaeological presentations on the legacies of slavery, and an exhibition on the orishas. Photograph by Juventud Rebelde News.

Participants at the inauguration spoke about the indelible stamp left on the Cuban historic memory of those people who were violently uprooted from their lands and converted into slaves for cheap labor.

UNESCO Executive Committee President Olabiyi Babalola Joseph spoke about how the Atlantic slave trade forms an essential part of the shared history of Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and Americas.

Babalola said that the new museum represents a bridge among generations and is an interesting place to teach the African history and languages. He said the idea behind the Slave Route project is to break the silence on the immoral and ignoble practice of which Africa was a victim.

The Cuban museum hosts an important exhibition of pictures and texts. For instance, the visitor can learn about *calimbo*, a practice consisting of branding the African slave with a red-hot iron when they arrived as if they were animals, to identify them as a purchaser's property. They were branded on the stomach, arms or back and in the case of women on the chest or legs.

The castle that houses the museum laid its first stone on October 13, 1693 and was completed during the early 1700s.

UNEAC President Miguel Barnet spoke about the legacy of Fernando Ortiz, the islands first and foremost specialists on Afro-Cuba culture. He also spoke about the importance of being aware of what he called the sub-Saharan holocaust, "the worst ever known to humanity" and of the "stamp left by men and women who came to Cuba in thick chains, never to return to their lands, families and cultures."

Barnet also spoke about the importance of gaining a better understanding of Afro-Cuban religions, as one of the fundamental African legacies to Latin America and the Caribbean.

Also during the ceremony, Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai presented Cuban Minister of Culture Abel Prieto with the UNESCO Medal for the Cultural Diversity.

UNESCO Regional Office Director Van Hof said that the Slave Route project emerged in 1993 and in 2005 had three goals: to unveil the tragedy of slavery in different countries, to analyze the effects of slavery in contemporary societies and the changes and cultural heritage left by this tragedy, and to foster mutual understanding among peoples.

The *Afro América* exhibition was opened during the inauguration featuring 105 educational posters and 14 African sculptures donated by Cuban artist Lorenzo Padilla.